Playing with Place: Towards Creative Mapping Praxis in Post-conflict Belfast

*Amy Mulvenna
University of Manchester, United Kingdom

Peter Shirlow argued that "the fundamental problem affecting Belfast is that geography matters in ways that are overt and obvious" (2006, p107). It is true that the material reality of geographies of division and everyday conflict remain a reality for many children and young people in Belfast: in the 26 peace walls, street murals, and flag displays; in family stories, cultural traditions, and segregated schooling. Yet, along with these monoliths of political and cultural expression, children and young people’s everyday lives are complexly and obliquely interwoven across various sites and flows of the social, material, cultural and political.

In this paper, I discuss findings from my PhD research with children aged 7-12 across youth centres in Belfast. I focus on two of the four playful, processual and participatory ‘creative cuts’ I have developed (as opposed to methods), involving tent-making and curating a Museum of Found Things. Through the cuts, I seek to upend and extend existing research methodologies and ways of ‘framing’ childhood in Belfast today, opening up novel spaces and ways for participants to explore and express perspectives on what matters to them in their city.

I argue that maps are performative and material objects, and also things "act and do" in creative mapping praxis (Pyry and Tani, 2017, p.4): it is not contingent on human-centric knowledge and imaginaries of the materiality of the landscape. Rather, the processuality, tactility and textility of making, doing, and mapping productively intersect the materiality of the body, landscape, and all things entangled in a contingent continuum between intra-active 'thing-play' and (material) performance. To this end, this paper foregrounds the materiality, tactility and 'intra-action' (Barad, 2003) emergent in mutable modes and moments of arts-based creative mapping praxis, as well as the productive conceptual relations between ‘dwelling with’, playfulness and enchantment (Ingold, 2000). This relational approach opens up further conceptualisations concerning ways in which the cuts enact more-than-human spaces of encounter, enabling participants’ subjectivation to come into play through environmental and social relations. And I further question: what advantages might creative, methodological mapping encounters bring to considerations of children’s everyday geographies in other ‘post-conflict’ societies?

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